

(Synopsis of the manuscript IN THE MASTER'S GARDEN by Marvin Ernest Colin Higgins- Swami Swayamswaroopananda Saraswati)

WRITINGS ON MY GURUDEV

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BY MARVIN ERNEST COLIN HIGGINS (SWAYAMSWAROOPANANDA)  
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(chapter 1 - The flying Swami, aka The Minus-Millionaire)

My beloved Gurudev, Swami Vishnudevananda, was born in the southern Indian state of Kerala - home to the legendary ancient seers Sankaracharya and Agastya.

A year after I was born in 1956, my future Guru was sent to the west by his own master, Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, Himalayas. Many yogis were being reborn in the west, Swami Vishnu was told. He would be able to help them in their spiritual evolution.

While I grew through childhood into early teenage life, Swami Vishnu was teaching yoga and setting up centers in countries across the Pacific, in the United States, Canada and around the entire world.

When I finally met Swami Vishnu in my twenties, I had already read his book "The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga." Using his printed lessons I had already begun practising and had attended a free introductory Yoga class in West Palm Beach, Florida, at a center started by Swami Vishnu's students, although unknown to me at the time.

Working for a daily newspaper in Nassau, Bahamas years later, I was assigned to interview Swami Vishnu at his Bahamas ashram on Paradise Island.

I was astounded. I had no idea that the ashram existed in my birth country. I was thrilled to be in the presence of someone who had played such a great part in my development.

The short, brown-skinned Swami Vishnu was then in his fifties. His long, flowing hair was silvery-white - glowing and luminescent.

I was shocked to see that he had a huge, tight "beer belly." He seemed vastly different from the trim, muscled young man he was in the photographs of his book.

It would be years before I learned that for some Yogis practising deep meditation, the breath stops entirely and cosmic energy builds up in the abdomen, pushing it out like a balloon.

But I was not put off by the Guru's belly. His everflowing laughter and 1,000 watt smile swept me up in love and respect.

I noticed that his attendants seemed vigilantly ready to catch and obey his every word, happily and lovingly.

As I sat with other newspaper, radio and television people on the veranda of Swami Vishnu's cottage, he told his plans for protesting the divisions between nations by flying a hang glider across the then-closed Berlin Wall, from west to east.

He related his previous protests for peace and unity in Belfast, Northern Ireland and in Israel and Egypt, when those two countries were at war.

I would, over the years, learn of Swami Vishnu's peace trips to Havana, Cuba, the Pakistani/Indian border and Iran. Before his death in 1993, the Guru would have extended his peace protests to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab - meeting with armed Sikhs inside while surrounded by the Indian army - and to the West Bank in Palestine.

Surrounded by weapons, challenged with being shot out of the sky, held for hours as a suspected spy, threatened with arrest by American, Russian, British and German authorities, the Guru was never harmed or imprisoned. Everyone of his missions was carried out successfully, as he spread leaflets calling for peace, marigold flowers and the grace of his joyful, powerful presence.

"Many have died for war," he told us. "I do not mind dying for peace."

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-Chapter 2 - The Romance Begins.

After meeting Swami Vishnu, personally, at his Bahamas press conference in 1983, I began attending classes and programs at his beautiful Paradise Island ashram where the press briefing had been held.

One day, as I was ferried across Nassau harbor for a visit to the ashram, my ferryman informed me that the Guru was in attendance. In fact, he was leaving that day.

"Maybe you'll get to see him," the young Bahamian disciple said, smiling warmly. He had joined Swami Vishnu's organization after high school and was one of only two Bahamians serving in the Guru's worldwide mission.

People began gathering at the ashram dock later, waiting to bid Swami Vishnu farewell, and I joined the small group.

Someone passed by pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with luggage. Behind him came the Guru, dressed in a short-sleeved pullover shirt and long-legged athletic pants, both a bright peach color. On his feet were simple sandals.

His clean-shaven face smiling broadly, Swami Vishnu folded his arms across his broad chest and leaned casually against a low wall. He was the same short roley-poley elf I remembered from our first encounter.

"Chant Om Namo Narayanaya!" instructed the Guru, laughing. "Lord Vishnu will not come unless you chant!"

Everyone took up the ancient Indian peace chant and Swami Vishnu resumed his slow walk towards the dock and waiting ferry.

Again I was amazed at his intense smile and powerful aura of joy. At the interview in 1983, I realized I'd never heard anyone talk so fast and yet so distinctly. The Guru had a thick Indian accent and yet I had no trouble understanding him.

The Yoga teacher was greeting and chatting briefly with ashram guests and staff as he continued to the ferry. From my position at the side of the walkway, I watched him intently.

Another man, who also appeared to be Indian, came up to the Guru suddenly and, bending before Swami Vishnu, touched his sandalled feet with both hands. Then the man touched his hands to his own forehead, as though transferring some energy from the Guru to himself.

Swami Vishnu stood chuckling softly and, as the man stood before him with his hands together in the attitude of prayer, the teacher pressed his own palms together to offer salutation to the devotee.

Talking excitedly, the Guru said he was at the point in his life when all he wanted to do was chant God's name.

As he continued towards the ferry, Swami Vishnu suddenly pinned his eyes on me.

In a flash, he was upon me, beaming a smile that seemed etched permanently on his broad handsome face. Looking deeply into my eyes, he shot several questions at me rapid-fire: "Hello! How are you? What is your name? Where are you from?"

He didn't seem to recognize me from among the local news persons who'd interviewed him for his Berlin Wall peace flight, but learning that I was a reporter, he instructed me: "Keep coming to the ashram. And write an article about Yoga!"

Turning to one of his attendants, Swami Vishnu asked her to accompany me to the closed boutique, open it and give me a selection of his books.

No words can describe my state of ecstasy after having gazed into his eyes and bathed in his smile. As I swooned, clutching three Yoga books, the Guru's attendant politely hurried me along. "Could you walk a little faster please? Swamiji's getting ready to leave now."

Only then did I snap out of my dreamlike world and hurry down to the ferry, boarding it along with the Guru and others.

The Yoga teacher seemed to have now transformed into a military commander. He wore a stern look and his eyes seemed to examine every detail of his ashram's operations. Every now and then, he crisply issued instructions to one or the other of his disciples.

I would later learn that the Guru came to the path of Yoga while a teenager in the Indian Army. Following an argument with fellow soldiers that unsettled him deeply, the then-Thanka Swamy (Golden Master) rummaged through a trash basket and found a pamphlet entitled: "The Science of Seven Cultures for the Quick Evolution of the Human Soul" by his soon-to-be-master, Swami Sivananda.

As I would also do with his book, Swami Vishnu began practising Yoga using the pamphlet. Secretly, in his army tent at night.

While working for the Tribune Newspaper in the Bahamas, and living with my mother's spinster aunt - Jane Johnson of Delancy Street - I would practice secretly in the darkened living room at night.

This went on until one night the lights suddenly snapped on. Aunt Jane, shocked, asked: "Colin? What are you doing?"

Then she commented: "Child, you should be trying to fill your head. Not empty it."

But back to Swami Vishnu's departure from his Paradise Island Yoga Retreat.

On the main island of New Providence, other devotees were waiting to bid the Guru farewell. Again he laughingly greeted all and then climbed into a waiting taxi for the trip to the airport.

But before the cabbie could pull off, devotees and disciples surrounded the taxi and took up a chant together. It was the Mahamrityanjaya chant, an ancient Sanskrit prayer used by the Guru whenever departing on a trip: "We worship the Three-Eyed-One who is fragrant. May He liberate us from death, even as the cucumber is liberated from the creeper."

On and on the chant went, invoking peace and other blessings for all, and I couldn't help but admire the Bahamian taxi-man's calm patience. Swami Vishnu sat in the taxi with head bowed and eyes closed as the beautiful throaty sounds washed over us.

As I watched my future Guru pull away in the cab, with several years still to come before I understood the chant or quit as my paper's sub-editor and joined the Yoga teacher's mission, I knew I could not have been more ecstatic.

As I look back, I see the tell-tale signs of his grace and guidance.

I have never forgotten - I will never forget - his gaze, the sound of his voice.

I can never forget the joy, peace and strength he gave.

I live now in gratitude and appreciation.

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Chapter 3 - Into the Fire of Love.

Four years after meeting Swami Vishnu, I resigned from my newspaper position and joined the Yoga teacher's mission. It was 1987.

This year, unknown to me, marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of Swami Vishnu's own Guru - Master Sivananda. To celebrate, Swami Vishnu organized a special gathering in India. Participants held hands and chanted Om Namo Narayanaya for world peace.

Swami Vishnu travelled with attendants to his master's ashram in Rishikesh, up in the Himalayan mountains, where devotees from around the world gathered for centenary celebrations.

He visited Sivananda's birthplace in Patamadai, wading through the nearby river before meditating in the room where Sivananda, as a child, meditated beside his own father.

Swami Vishnu returned to his headquarters in Quebec, Canada and decided that in the upcoming year he would dedicate himself to the practise of silence and isolation.

So for about a year, while I served as receptionist, dishwasher, secretary, Yoga Professor and advertising person at his Bahamas ashram, the Guru would remain at his Canada ashram.

But he still kept up to date on all matters concerning the running of his worldwide organization. He communicated with us regularly through his "Gurugram" and indicated clearly his wish to finish up his work on earth and move on. He told us that he was already prepared to leave, but, according to him, we were "hijackers" and had enforced his continued stay on the planet.

When he decided to conclude his isolation and resume tours of his worldwide centers and ashrams, the Guru sent word that he was coming to the Bahamas.

I then witnessed a strange phenomenon among senior and longtime staff. There was nervous but seemingly genuinely happy laughter. Meetings were held to check the entire organization of the ashram. Unfinished projects were immediately completed.

There seemed to be a mix of pure terror and ecstatic joy circulating throughout the ashram.

Two major elements had emerged in my investigation of this enigmatic Yogi. He seemed irresistably lovable, a prankster who loved a good joke.

I remember how, at the press conference in 1983, we natives of a notoriously avid meat-eating country eyed the Guru's offering of vegetarian snacks with undisguised suspicion.

"Don't worry," the Guru reassured us. "Nothing here will kill you."

He'd roared with unrestrained laughter and we all joined.

He'd told us, at that same press conference, how he flew his twin-engined Piper Apache from Israel into Egypt while those countries were in a state of war. The Guru had filed a dummy flight plan and when his true intentions were discovered, Israeli fighter jets intercepted him.

The psychedelic multi-colored "peace plane," the handiwork of artist Peter Max - who also did the Beatles "Yellow Submarine" album cover and an album cover for jazz musician Alice Coltrane - flew on steadily, despite commands to desist.

When one fighter pilot threatened to shoot him down, the Guru threw a single marigold flower out of his window at his would-be assailant.

He told us that suddenly, his aircraft began shuddering violently. Turning to his co-pilot, he informed us of the possibility that they had been hit. "If we're going to die, we should prepare by chanting the Lord's name," added the Yogi to his Jewish student.

"We chanted and we chanted and we chanted," Swami Vishnu related solemnly. "But...nothing happened!" Again, he let loose with his unfettered giggling and booming laughter. And again, we newspeople joined in.

There was another side of the Guru I'd discovered that was a little disconcerting. He seemed, from some stories, to be a hard, driving taskmaster, satisfied only with perfection.

Epic stories were told of his tantrums and legendary shouting.

My partner in the office - a longtime Spanish staffer who joined the Guru's mission right out of high school - told me: "He's going to want to see every scrap of paper! If anything isn't right..." Instead of finishing the sentence, she drew her right forefinger across her throat, her eyes wide and glazed.

Disciples toiled almost nonstop to renovate the Guru's harborside cottage - where I and others had interviewed him years earlier. Special insulation was added to the walls to help keep out amplified music and shouting from Club Med next door and party boats in the harbor.

I wanted to be in the welcoming party but night came and there was no sign of Swami Vishnu.

Rain started. Heavy, driving rain. Then lightning began flashing, followed by booming claps of thunder.

Still no sign of the Guru.

Hours passed and I climbed up to my bedroom in the loft above the office and went to sleep.

During my deep and peaceful sleep, I had a dream.

I saw the Guru walking along the beautiful white sands of our beach, which fronted the northern side of the ashram. Cradled in his arms tenderly was a baby.

I realized that I was that baby.

THE FOREGOING IS A SYNOPSIS OF MY UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT "IN THE MASTER'S GARDEN." COPIES ARE WITH THE AMERICAN AUTHOR NEALE DONALD WALSCHE (NEW YORK OFFICE) AND THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY (CARICOM), AT ITS HEADQUARTERS/SECRETARIAT IN GEORGETOWN, GUYANA (OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL).